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FRENCH WEST AFRICAN GOVERNORS' CONFERENCE IN ABIDJAN

[The article summarized below contains Pierre Chauvet's impressions on the latest conference of governors of French West Africa.]

Choice of Site Honors Ivory Coast

The Governors' Conference of French West Africa, presided over by Cornut-Gentille, High Commissioner of the French Republic and Governor General of French West Africa, met recently in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. This is the first time that this regular conference, which usually meets at least twice a year, was not held in Dakar.

The choice of Abidjan as the site of the conference is in itself quite an event. Broadly speaking, the Federation (French West Africa) can be divided into two areas: the Sahel (headed by Dakar) and the forest area (headed by Abidjan). The forest area has always been considered as extremely rich, contributing a great deal to the community, but still playing second fiddle to the Sahel. Abidjan, at the edge of the Ebré Lagoon, proud of its bustling activity, of its youthful zeal, and of the enormous possibilities of its hinterland, admits with reluctance that Dakar, "service station of the Atlantic" at the head of an anemic Senegal, should always be preferred.

This attitude is not always stated, but it is felt, nevertheless, and manifests itself in subtle ways when it is not actually proclaimed with dignity in the Grand Council.

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In choosing the Ivory Coast as the site for this conference, Governor General Cornut-Gentille meant to prove that these petty jealousies have not affected his attitude. Moreover, in the course of numerous meetings, he pointed out: "Our presence in Abidjan testifies to the importance of the Ivory Coast but also shows that beyond the so-called rivalries between the north and the south of the federation there exist a common bond of interests and a common will to work."

Cornut-Gentille went on to say that this conference inaugurated a new method "to foster a better development of the concept of federation." All the citizens of Abidjan, black or white, responded to this gesture and to the public spectacles accompanying the event.

The significance of the executive meetings of the conference was underlined by Cornut-Gentille at the reception he gave for the Association des Originaires de la Cote d'Ivoire (Association of Native Inhabitants of the Ivory Coast) when he said: "We are not here for spectacular festivities but to work for the common good; after our arduous conferences, we wish to come into contact not only with the leaders and officials but also with the people."

The people of Abidjan demonstrated extreme satisfaction at these personal contacts.

Conference Both a Review and a Preview

The governors' conference had two other aims: to present a balance sheet for the past year and a program for the future. Of the executive meetings, in which only the territorial governors and high federal administrators participated, only scant bits of information filtered through. However, the broad outline of their subject matter can be stated as follows:

The Federation begins the year [1953] with a balanced budget, and no liabilities. Twenty-two billion francs will be provided for government services, and several billion will be used for new projects.

The territories also have drawn up their balance sheets. Senegal, unfortunately, has chalked up a score [debt?] of 1.3 billion francs, which it will try to wipe out in 3 years.

French Sudan hopes to finish paying off half of its obligations -- 250 million francs. French Guinea has imposed on itself a great sacrifice, which it believes to be transitory, in order simultaneously to eliminate its deficit and to continue its equipment program. The Ivory Coast, rich and generous, contributed its share to the common fund without too much trouble.

Dahomey is bleeding itself white in order to do better. Upper Volta and Niger, aware of their own poverty, are sizing up their resources and hoping that someday they will be in the same position as Mauritania, where copper and iron mining is the only subject of conversation.

Future development plans are not excluded from these budgets, each of which contains well-defined provisions for investments and new projects. These provisions amount to nearly 2 billion francs and, together with the billions of the federal budget and of FIDES (Fonds d'Investissements et du developpement Economique et Social, Economic and Social Investment and Development Fund), will permit a continuation of the equipment program of the Federation.

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Economic Factors Condition Social Progress

In the economic field, 1952 was an "average" year. Peanuts (480,000 tons) are holding their own with difficulty, and lumber (75,000 tons) is under a certain handicap.

Coffee and cocoa will continue on the upgrade. Two new economic factors -- bauxite and iron in French Guinea and copper in Mauritania -- will certainly add to the intrinsic wealth of the country.

Rationalization of crop cultivation, a surplus of food products, and soil and forest conservation should bring about an improvement in living conditions among the rural people.

Social development, in the opinion of Governor General Cornut-Gentille, "is the goal, and economic development is the means."

Questions concerning social and health improvement and the methods of application of the recently approved Labor Code were also the subject of exchange of views and directives at the conference.

Ivory Coast Draws Attention

The Ivory Coast occupies a privileged position among French West African territories because of its real wealth and its potential for the future.

The development of this potential was the subject of discussions, apart from the governors' conference itself. These discussions were held by leaders of the various chambers of commerce and agriculture, lumbermen's associations, and chiefs of cercles.

Governor General Cornut-Gentille, at various times, pointed to the significance of these talks from the standpoint of the common effort to be made. He noted that in this rich country, there is little difference between the financial prospects of a minor government worker and those of a planter, and that this combination, unique in French West Africa, must give hope for an increased production and a much speedier modernization of the local way of life.

After having referred to the problems posed by the rise of a proletariat, African and European; by the implementation of the Labor Code, which he termed a "difficult innovation which requires a loyal application"; and by the need to pattern the fiscal policy on actual realities, the Governor General remarked: "We have no qualms in aiming high and expecting much in the Ivory Coast."

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